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## THE BATTLE OF LONG ISLAND

"THE dilatoriness and stupidity of the enemy saved us," wrote General Charles Lee to Washington in July, 1776, immediately after the repulse of the British fleet under Sir Peter Parker in the attempt on Charleston. The same qualities in those opposed to him, combined with an almost amazing element of pure luck, saved Washington and the cause of American independence at New York less than two months later; for not often has a force on which great results depended found itself in a worse position than did the Americans then; and seldom has any force in such a position been afforded equal opportunities for escape.

The first and most striking thing that impresses one wishing to understand the strange military fiasco which took place about New York during the months of August, September, and October, 1776, is the dazzling effect on the eyes and judgment of historians of the glamour which surrounds Washington. That he should have been responsible for grave errors of military judgment which ought under any reasonable doctrine of probabilities to have ruined the American cause and deprived the world of one of its immortalities, that he should have involved his army in disaster and disgrace as the result of hesitation at a time when decision was essential, — is something not to be admitted. The mere suggestion of such things is unpatriotic; but, none the less, it seems to have been the case. At Long Island, Bunker Hill was fairly outdone; and not even "the dilatoriness and stupidity of the enemy" saved the Patriots from a disaster which in no way, moral or otherwise, could be exploited as a victory; while to chance alone was it due that the calamity, great at best, was not irretrievable and final.

The British evacuated Boston on the 16th of March. The point at which the next blow would be struck could only be surmised by those in charge of the Patriot cause, but New York naturally suggested itself. Obviously it was the strategic centre. Early in the year a movement in that direction was anticipated, and accordingly General Charles Lee was detached from the army before Boston and went by order of Washington to New York, arriving there on the 4th of February. He at once took in the difficulties of the situation. "What to do with this city," he wrote to Washington,

"I own, puzzles me. It is so encircled with deep navigable water, that whoever commands the sea must command the town." Thus the command of the sea was manifestly the key of the situation at New York; and the British held that key.

Lee, nevertheless, planned such a system of defences as seemed practicable; but, being subsequently assigned by Congress to the command of the Department of the South, he left New York on the 7th of March, leaving Stirling in temporary charge. Shortly after, Stirling was superseded by Putnam, who came under instructions from Washington to go on with the defences according to Lee's plans. On the 13th of April, Washington himself arrived, and assumed command.

Although Washington had taken it for granted that the British fleet when it sailed from Boston in March would proceed at once to New York, instead of so doing it went to Halifax, there to refit; and it was not until June 29 that the expedition arrived at Sandy Hook, inside of which it came to anchor. Landing his army on Staten Island, General Howe there awaited the arrival of additional ships and reinforcements, then shortly looked for, under command of his brother, Admiral Lord Howe. They appeared in July.

Washington then found himself in command of some 9000 so-called effectives, "2000 of whom were entirely destitute of arms." They were imperfectly organized, insufficiently equipped, largely composed of unreliable militia, without adequate artillery, and without any cavalry. Such as they were, they had absolutely no naval support. The problem before Washington was with such means to defend against a thoroughly equipped and disciplined force of twice his size, supported by a powerful fleet, a place at the absolute command of whoever controlled the sea. As the result showed, the problem did not admit of successful solution. Yet for two whole months Washington confronted it, studying it doubtless in every aspect; and not once does it seem to have occurred to him that it was insoluble, or that an attempt at its solution was fraught with excessive danger. During that time he wrote many letters and some formal reports; but in not one of them does he even suggest that the course pursued was opposed to his military judgment or based on incorrect strategic principles. He never even hints that he is taking what seems to him a dangerous military risk under a pressure of political necessity. On the contrary, even after the inevitable disaster had befallen him, he frankly wrote, "Till of late, I had no doubt in my own mind of defending this place."

Yet in this attempted defence Washington was compelled to violate, and did violate, almost every recognized principle of warfare. To defend New York it was absolutely necessary to hold the heights of Brooklyn, opposite the city; for those heights, as did Bunker Hill in the case of Boston, commanded New York within easy artillery fire. But Brooklyn was on an island, and was separated from New York by deep navigable water. Above New York, on both sides, east and west, were other wide, navigable channels, which also had to be covered. In order to protect the place, therefore, Washington had to divide his inadequate force to such a degree that, even if his enemy through their command of the sea did not, the moment active operations began, cut him completely in two, it was wholly out of the question for one portion of his army, in case of emergency, to support or assist the other portion. But again, if any successful resistance was possible, it was only possible through holding to a policy of intrenchments. The Patriot force should have been kept within the most limited and strongest lines of defence possible; and, as at Bunker Hill, it should have been prepared to resist attack in front, trusting to the incompetence of their opponents that the attack would not be made from the rear. In case the attack was from the rear, with the enemy in absolute control of the water, and free to strike when and where he pleased, the Patriot army was manifestly in imminent danger of destruction. Precipitate retreat only could save it; as, in the end, it did save it.

Under such circumstances, Washington not only divided his inadequate army, but when his enemy obliged him by attacking just where he wanted to be attacked, in full front, instead of awaiting the assault within his lines, as did Prescott at Bunker Hill, Washington actually went out to meet it, challenging the fate which befell him. And at last, even his own excellent management in the moment of disaster could not have saved the Patriot cause from irretrievable ruin and himself from hopeless failure and disgrace, had it not been combined with almost miraculous good-luck, to which the "dilatoriness and stupidity of the enemy" most effectively contributed at the very juncture when those under him confidently wrote that Howe would not give his opponent "time to breathe, but push his successes like a winning gamester."

Though General Howe had come to anchor inside of Sandy Hook on the 29th of June and been joined there by Lord Howe and the fleet on the 1st of July, it was not until the 22d of August that active operations on Long Island began. During that long interval of over seven weeks of the best campaigning weather of

the whole year, the British army rested quietly in its summer camp on Staten Island. On the 12th of July two English ships, respectively of 40 and 20 guns, had with perfect impunity run by the defences of New York and gone up the Hudson to the Tappan Sea, where they lay in apparent perfect security, with awnings stretched, sleeping in the sunshine, until the 18th of August; a sufficient indication of how complete was the British command of the sea, and how futile were the American efforts to obstruct the navigable channels. On the 7th of August thirty transports, under convoy of three frigates, put to sea with the design of going around Long Island, and so threatening New York and the American line of retreat from the East River. Meanwhile, the two Howes were in daily communication with Governor Tryon, who was on board one of the English ships of war, and through the royalists of the mainland and Long Island, had all necessary information not only as to localities and roads, but in regard to the movements of the Patriots. They lacked neither guides nor pilots, and were plentifully supplied with provisions. Under these circumstances, with an enemy greatly superior both in numbers and in equipment in undisputed control of the sea, and actually cutting off his communications with the west bank of the Hudson, it was small matter of surprise that, as the weeks dragged on, many of Washington's ablest advisers looked on the situation with uneasiness. They feared being entrapped "on this tongue of land, where," as one of them later expressed it, "we ought never to have been."

Besides the fleet, the British commander had, by the middle of August, 30,000 men in a high state of efficiency, with a large park of artillery and a small body of cavalry; Washington had nominally 17,500 men, of whom about 14,000 were fit for duty, with a few pieces of field artillery, but no mounted force. And with such means at his command, incredible as it seems, he actually thought he could defend a land and water front of nearly thirty miles, vulnerable in front and flank and rear, besides being cut in two by a navigable channel both broad and deep; while the enemy, greatly superior in mere numbers as well as in discipline and equipment, was, through an undisputed command of the water, free to concentrate himself for a decisive blow at any point. Neither did Washington indulge in any false confidence in the efficacy of his batteries to check the enemy's vessels of war; on the contrary, as he himself wrote a whole month before the battle of Long Island, he "had long most religiously believed that a vessel with a brisk wind and strong tide cannot, unless by a chance shot, be stopped by a battery."

Meanwhile, the interior works at Brooklyn alone called for a force of at least 8000 men to hold them with any prospect of success; while the exterior lines before Flatbush required an equal number, if the enemy was to be retarded there even for a day. In other words, if Howe was, as at Bunker Hill, obliging enough to attack the position Washington had chosen full in front and by land alone, without any co-operation from the fleet, and leaving his opponents' flanks and rear quite unmolested, — even in this case more than the whole force of the Patriot army would be needed for the defence of Brooklyn alone.

At last, everything, after weeks of apparently needless procrastination, being in readiness, the Howes determined to strike, and on the 22d of August, Sir Henry Clinton, with 15,000 men, one regiment of cavalry, and forty pieces of artillery, crossed over from Staten to Long Island and landed, unopposed, at Gravesend. It was evident where the blow by land was to be looked for. Brooklyn was the enemy's military objective; or at least one of his objectives. The difficulties of his situation, not to say its impossibilities, must, it would seem, have now dawned on Washington's mind. The position could hardly have been worse. As he himself mildly put it, making no allusion to a hostile fleet operating in broad navigable waters compassing him on three sides, the problem was "to oppose an army of 30,000 experienced veterans with about one-third (10,514) the number of raw troops, and those scattered some fifteen miles apart."

Though the British landed at Gravesend on the 22d of August, it was not until the evening (nine o'clock) of the 26th, or four days later, that they moved forward on the defences of Brooklyn. Constant skirmishing had in the meantime been going on, and the Americans had thus been allowed ample time in which to make their preparations. There was no element of surprise in the enemy's advance. During the earlier stages of preparation Greene had been in charge of the Brooklyn wing of the army; but he had been taken down by a fever and was wholly unfit for duty. General Sullivan succeeded him in temporary command. All along, Washington and Greene had seen, what indeed was obvious, that with the means at their disposal, a landing of the British on Long Island could not be prevented; but, if Brooklyn was once occupied by the enemy, New York became untenable; it was the case of Dorchester Heights and Boston harbor reversed, for the British in the present case would hold the heights and the Americans the town commanded by the heights. The problem immediately involved was, therefore, the defence of Brooklyn

against an attack from the land side, in all probability supported by a simultaneous attack on its water front and the American rear. Greene had, accordingly, sought to defend Brooklyn by constructing a line of intrenchments and redoubts back of the village from Gowanus Cove on the south to Wallabout Bay on the north, presenting a front of a little less than a mile in extent, well protected by creeks and morasses on either flank, and, at its centre, about one mile and a quarter from the landing-place of the ferry to New York. From these intrenchments to Gravesend was some eight miles, while between the two, about five miles from Gravesend and three from Brooklyn, rose a difficult, heavily wooded ridge, forming a natural longitudinal barrier practically passable at three points; one close to the bay, the shore road; the second, three miles further inland, in front of Flatbush, being the direct and ordinary road between Gravesend and Brooklyn; and the third the Jamaica road, two miles further still to the east. Under these circumstances, assuming that they were resolved to try to hold New York, the course to be pursued by the Americans was obvious. As soon as the landing of the British at Gravesend was known, that is, on the 22d of August, the largest available force ought to have been concentrated under cover of the Brooklyn intrenchments, while strong infantry outposts should have been put at each of the three passes, the roads beyond being constantly watched by mounted patrols. To do this work at least 15,000 men, with adequate artillery and cavalry, would have been required, a certain mounted force being on such extended lines indispensable to safety. The force actually there was 5500 infantry, mostly militia none of whom had ever been in battle, with six pieces of light field artillery, and no cavalry whatever.

Instead of concentrating themselves within the Brooklyn intrenchments the Americans, when the English, after four days of delay, began to advance, actually went out in force to meet them on two of the roads, leaving the third, that to Jamaica, not only unprotected but not even watched. The natural result followed. Taking advantage of their great preponderance in numbers and excellent information and guidance, the British, advancing by three columns, found, to their great surprise, the Jamaica road unobstructed, — “a route we had never dreamed of,” as an American officer engaged innocently wrote, — and, by means of a well considered and rigorously executed right flanking movement got in the rear of the detachments under Stirling and Sullivan, who had been either posted or hurried forward to defend the two western and more direct approaches; the practical destruction of

those detachments followed. Both commanders were captured, and more than one-third of the entire force disposable for the defence of Brooklyn was destroyed. The American loss in killed, wounded, and missing was about 1500, out of a total force engaged not probably exceeding 3500. Contemporaneous comments are sometimes the best, and it would be difficult to improve on those upon this affair shortly after jotted down by Captain William Olney of the Rhode Island regiment in Stirling's command. It covers the ground. "At the time, I did not pretend to know or examine the generalship of posting Sullivan's and Stirling's forces as they were, leaving the forts but poorly manned with sick and invalids. It must be on the supposition that the enemy would come on the direct road, and if our troops were overpowered they might retreat and defend the fort. But the enemy took a circuitous route, and where it was said Colonel — had neglected to guard, and arrived in our rear without notice. Had it been left to the British generals to make a disposition of our troops, it is a chance if they would have made it more advantageous to themselves, and but for their tardiness they might have taken our main fort. All that seemed to prevent it was a scarecrow row of palisades from the fort to low water in the cove, which Major Box had ordered set up that morning."

It is not putting it too strongly to say that Washington's position, as well as that of the American cause, was then desperate. The disaster occurred under Washington's eyes, for he found himself within the Brooklyn intrenchments, with Clinton's command at nine o'clock in the morning interposed between himself and the detachments under Sullivan and Stirling. Before two o'clock the fighting had wholly ceased. With an inadequate and demoralized command Washington then found himself isolated from the body of his army, such as it was, in New York, with a largely superior force flushed with success before him, and a fairly overwhelming naval armament threatening his flank and rear. Practically he was powerless. In other words, he had got himself and his cause into a wholly false position; and utter ruin stared him in the face. Again, luck and "the dilatoriness and stupidity of the enemy" saved him.

The course for Howe to pursue was now manifest. Six good hours of daylight remained, and, after demolishing the commands of Stirling and Sullivan, he should have followed up his success, striking at once and with all his force at Washington himself. Such was the decided opinion at the moment of the officers in command under Howe; while the body of the British army was so



flushed by victory and absolutely confident of success that it could with difficulty be prevented from an immediate assault. The experience of the next few days showed how thoroughly demoralized the Americans then were. It is true that American historians have since asserted, on what authority does not appear, that the British commander was then wise in not pressing his advantage, and that Washington "courted a storm in which he was almost sure to be victorious"; but, on the other hand, a general officer at the time in command of a portion of the Brooklyn lines described them as "unfinished in several places" and "so low that the rising ground immediately without it would have put it in the power of a man at 40 yards Distance to fire under my Horse's belly whenever he pleased." And such works as these it has since been confidently asserted could have been victoriously defended by militia, to use Washington's official language, "timid and ready to fly from their own shadows." The statement of the historian is not based on Washington as an authority.

At Bunker Hill Howe had been over-confident; at Brooklyn he was too cautious. Probably on the 27th of August, 1776, he remembered the 17th of June, 1775; and, a burnt child, he feared the fire. In any event, after lying for hours with his advance within gun-shot of Washington's lines, which his scouts approached so closely as to report that they could be carried almost instantly by assault, and which his subordinates begged leave to be allowed to attack and, it is said, fairly "stormed with rage when ordered to retire,"—after lying here for hours during a summer noon, he declared that enough had been done for one day, and drawing back, went into camp. In his official report of these operations, he stated that in his judgment the works could have been stormed, and that his soldiers were so eager for the assault "that it required repeated orders to prevail on them to desist"; but as it was apparent the opposing lines could be carried with slight loss by regular approaches, he commanded a halt. Probably, also, and not without reason, he may have expected that the British fleet would next day attack the Americans from the rear, and thus, having them between two fires with all their lines of retreat broken, a surrender would be necessary.

So far "the dilatoriness of the enemy" had saved Washington from total disaster. The element of luck next made itself felt in his favor. The British fleet was lying inside of Sandy Hook. It was impossible for a moment to suppose that the numerous ships of the line and frigates there idly anchored were not to co-operate with the army in the long-planned and carefully pre-

pared operations. They might engage the batteries on the North River, and cover a landing there in the Americans' New York rear, or they might open with their batteries on the town; or, most fatal move of all, they might work into the East River and, dividing Brooklyn from New York, cut the American army in two, and open with their batteries on Washington's Brooklyn rear. It was now the close of August, and in the region of New York the prevailing wind at that season is from the southwest. Such a wind may, indeed, almost be counted upon; and unquestionably was counted upon by the British commanders in planning their operations. A wind from the southwest would have carried the British ships directly up the East River and placed them in front of Brooklyn. Chance ordered otherwise. While General Howe was destroying the commands of Stirling and Sullivan, and threatening Washington's intrenchments, a strong northeast wind was blowing, against which, and the tide, five ships of the line, under command of Sir Peter Parker, in vain endeavored to beat up the bay. One ship of smaller size alone succeeded in working up sufficiently far to open with its guns on the wholly inadequate battery the Americans had established at Red Hook, on the western extremity of their Brooklyn lines; and the fire of even this single ship sufficed sadly to injure the breastworks and dismount some of the guns. If this was so, the effect of the broadsides of the fleet may be surmised. That exceptional northeast wind in August was for Washington a stroke of luck of the description sometimes classified as "providential."

Such are the established undisputed facts. The position into which the American leader had got himself was, from a military point of view, one of utter and manifest falseness; and it is difficult to read the accounts of the operation since given by American historians, and believe that they were gravely prepared. They amount simply to a deification of Washington,—a man who needs no deification,—based on a complete ignoring of facts. The slowness Washington apparently then evinced in appreciating the difficulties of his situation was only less remarkable than the slowness of his enemy in taking advantage of his mistakes, and the northeast wind with its heavy veil of mist which enabled him to extricate himself from them. In earlier times the poets were in the habit of attributing such coincidences to the direct interposition of the gods; and, according to Homer, when Achilles had Agenor in his grasp

"Then fiercely rushing on the daring foe,  
His lifted arm prepares the fatal blow:

But jealous of his aim Apollo shrouds  
The god-like Trojan in a veil of clouds.  
Safe from pursuit, and shut from mortal view,  
Dismiss'd with fame, the favor'd youth withdrew."

In a like spirit, the American historian, summing the whole thing up, remarks ingeniously, that while "it redounded greatly to the reputation of Washington," many "who considered the variety of risks and dangers which surrounded the camp, and the apparently fortuitous circumstances which averted them all, were disposed to attribute the safe retreat of the Patriot army to a peculiar Providence." Attention has already been called to the fact that Frederick, when such "interventions" and "Providences" occurred in his own experience, referred to them in a less figurative and more matter-of-fact way as instances of "luck" in warfare.

Washington realized the nature of the situation well enough. It was simply desperate. With between seven and eight thousand undisciplined men, beaten and demoralized at that, he was cooped up with an uncovered rear. Immediate retreat was impossible, and a successful resistance hardly to be hoped; so, like a good and vigilant commander, he was in the saddle before break of day of the 28th, going the rounds of the works and seeking to encourage his followers. The morning broke lowering and dreary, only to reveal to the Patriots the great superiority of the force opposed to them. It was a case of four to one. Fortunately, the enemy did not move. As the day advanced they did, indeed, open with their artillery, and the usual irregular fire of sharpshooters went on between the lines; but presently a drenching rain set in, by which the historians tell us the combatants were "driven into their tents," where they kept themselves until the latter part of the day. There is at this point almost a touch of humor in the narrative, and it is difficult to believe that it is one of actual warfare; yet the career of Washington and the cause of American independence hung in the balance, with an August rain the disturbing factor. But when it came to "dilatoriness," Sir William Howe seems always to have proved himself equal to any occasion.

Presently, while it was still early in the day, the situation in Brooklyn was improved by the arrival of reinforcements under General Mifflin, consisting of three regiments considered as good as any in the army, though so reduced by sickness and other causes that they numbered altogether but 1300 men; one of those regiments, however, was Glover's of Marblehead, mostly sailors and

fishermen, and, with a wide and swift-flowing channel between him and his only possible line of retreat, Washington, as the result showed, then stood in quite as great need of men who could trim a sail and pull an oar as of those who could handle a musket or a shovel. Mifflin's command was marched at once into the weakly defended intrenchments on the left of the line, opposite Clinton.

Now one of the most extraordinary incidents of this singularly conducted campaign is said to have occurred. It sounds so like a travesty of war that it has to be told in the words of the apparently unconscious historian. A dense fog was hanging over the bay and island. A group of officers, among whom were Mifflin and Reed, Washington's adjutant-general, rode out to take a look about. As they were on the high ground at the western extremity of the lines, facing towards Staten Island, a light breeze lifted the fog, disclosing to them the British ships of war. The historian then goes on: "Some movement was apparently in agitation. The idea occurred to the reconnoitring party that the fleet was preparing, should the wind hold and the fog clear away, to come up the bay at the turn of the tide, silence the feeble batteries at Red Hook and the city, and anchor in the East River. In that case, the army on Long Island would be completely surrounded and entrapped. . . . Other ships had passed round Long Island, and were at Flushing Bay on the Sound. Those might land troops on the east side of Harlem River, and make themselves masters of King's Bridge, — that key to Manhattan Island." These facts, as military considerations, might, it would seem, for several days, if not weeks, have been obvious; but, according to the American historians, they would appear to have now for the first time dawned on the minds of the reconnoitring officers, for, "alarmed at this perilous probability, they spurred back to headquarters, to urge the immediate withdrawal of the army, [and] as this might not be acceptable advice, Reed, emboldened by his intimacy with the commander-in-chief, undertook to give it." It is curious to consider what the writer here meant by the words "this might not be acceptable advice."

And it is of such material as this that what is called history is fabricated! This story passed into all the earlier accounts of the operations on Long Island, and, though now rejected by better authorities,<sup>1</sup> is still the popular legend. The incident is said

<sup>1</sup> Bancroft. Note to Chapter V. of *Epoch Fourth*, containing account of the retreat from Long Island.

to have occurred on the morning of the 29th; the disaster in front of Flatbush had occurred on the 27th; and it is safe to say that not for one moment during the slow intervening hours had the direction of the wind and the movements of the British fleet been absent from the mind not only of Washington, but of every intelligent officer or man within the Brooklyn lines. Their fate hung in the balance. The reconnoitring party may have ridden down to Red Hook in the way described — probably did ride down there; but what those comprising it there saw could have suggested nothing new either to themselves or to Washington. It could only have emphasized the peril of the situation, and the necessity of immediately extricating themselves from it — if they could!

But it is just situations of this sort which bring out great qualities, and those of Washington were now revealed. He showed the *mens æqua in arduis*! With a calm presence and a cool, prescient mind, he looked the situation in the face, recognized the mistake he had made, and prepared to extricate himself from the consequences of it, if, indeed, extrication was yet possible. Up to noon of the 29th, forty-eight hours after the disaster of Flatbush, no step, it is said, had been taken looking to the evacuation of the now wholly untenable position. On the contrary, 1300 fresh men had been added to the 7500, the withdrawal of whom was already a difficult problem. But this can hardly be a correct statement of the case. It implies an absence of ordinary caution and foresight on the part of Washington and those about him which is not supposable. When, therefore, the historian proceeds to tell us that after a council of war, held somewhere about noon on the 29th, had decided to retreat across the river, Washington then sent out his orders to Heath at New York, who, during the afternoon, “collected every sloop, yacht, fishing-smack, yawl, scow, or row-boat that could be found in either water from the Battery to King’s Bridge or Hell Gate,” — a distance in some cases of fifteen miles, — when the historian makes this statement, he simply evinces a lack of familiarity with the practical operation of a quartermaster’s department. The thing could not be done in that time and in that way. It is an imputation on Washington’s intelligence to suppose that he could have allowed himself with half of his army to be shut up in Brooklyn for days, without having transportation provided and at hand in case a retreat became necessary. The result shows that he did have it. Provision for what now ensued had evidently been made beforehand. The case for him was bad enough, but

in this respect not nearly so bad as his thick-and-thin panegyrists unconsciously make out.

On the evening of the 29th crafts of some sort necessary for the transportation of 9000 men and their munitions across the East River in a single night had been got together under the friendly cover of the fog, and were in readiness on the Brooklyn side. The men from Marblehead were then detailed for special duty, and the embarkation began. The mere statement of the case is sufficient. To transport 9000 men in twelve hours across a swift-flowing channel three-quarters of a mile wide, depending on a collection of boats, at best hastily improvised, and of every conceivable size and character, would be impossible under the eyes of a vigilant enemy immensely preponderant on land and in complete control of the water. To succeed in doing so under the most favorable circumstances would seem to demand perfect discipline and obedience in the ranks and a most orderly movement.

The patriotic historians now have the field full before them; and they certainly avail themselves of their opportunity, though not always in perfect accord among themselves as to facts. For instance, one asserts that "from about nine o'clock to nearly midnight, through wind and rain,—company by company,—sometimes grasping hands to keep companionship in the dense gloom,—speechless and silent, so that no sound should alarm the enemy,—feeling their way down the steep steps then leading to Fulton ferry, and feeling their way as they were passed into the waiting water craft, these drenched and weary men took passage for New York." This, if nothing else, is graphic. But another historian tells us that, though the Americans were towards daybreak "remarkably favored by the sudden rise of a fog which covered the East River, during the night the moon had shone brightly, and one can only wonder that the multitudinous splash of oars and the unavoidable murmur of ten thousand men embarking, with their heavy guns and stores, should not have attracted the attention of some wakeful sentinel, either on shore or on the fleet." This again is good; but the pure luck of this somewhat imaginary performance is characterized as Washington's "extraordinary skill." Here are two accounts of the state of the atmosphere on that momentous night; while a third historian tells us that, though "it was the night of the full moon," "about nine the ebb of the tide was accompanied with a heavy rain and the continued adverse wind which had raged for three days died away;" according to this authority, therefore, the night was neither dark nor one of light moonlight, but luminous. Comment seems quite unnecessary.

So also we are assured by the same authorities that the various detachments moved down to the place of embarkation "as quietly as possible and in excellent order, while Washington superintended the details;" — that they went down "speechless and silent," "sometimes grasping hands to keep companionship" is also, it has been seen, asserted. Meanwhile Washington himself told Mifflin at the time "that matters were in much confusion at the ferry"; and we get a glimpse of the nature of this "confusion" from the statement of an eye-witness who asserted that it was impossible to "get within a quarter of a mile of the ferry, the rebel crowd was so great, and they were in such trepidation that those in the rear were mounting on the shoulders and clambering over the heads of those before them."

It is not worth while to attempt to reconcile these wholly irreconcilable statements. The historians must settle it among themselves. A few things only are evident. Chief among these is the fact that, in a situation immensely trying, Washington kept his head, and inspired that confidence without which confusion would have become confounded, and all been lost. Again, the means of transportation seem to have been sufficient; the enemy was not vigilant; no inquisitive scouts harassed the lines; no patrol boats prowled the East River. In a word, the enemy, whether on land or water, afforded the Patriot army every possible facility for getting away, and the elements co-operated with the enemy; for, while that "providential fog" still hung over Long Island, concealing the movements of the Americans, the adverse wind of the previous days had died away so that the row-boats could be loaded to the gunwale, and, just at the right moment, a favoring breeze sprang up to aid the sail-boats. The potency of luck as a controlling element in warfare has rarely been more strikingly exemplified. It is even said that a negro, despatched by a Tory sympathizer at ten o'clock that night to notify the British of the movement then going on, found his way to an outpost and sought to deliver his message. Again — luck! for in this instance, at least, the result could in no way be attributed to the "prescience" of Washington. The outpost to which the negro emissary made his way was composed of Hessians, who could not understand a word the man said! And so they kept him under close guard as a suspicious character until daybreak, when at last the officer of the grand rounds appeared. It was then too late. When, a little later, an aid of Howe's, with a party of men, clambered, in consequence of this information, into the deserted works and made their way down to the Ferry landing,

the rear boats of Washington's retreating army were beyond musket shot, and nearing the New York shore.

The present paper relates merely to the operations on Long Island, and it is not necessary to follow the American army through its subsequent unfortunate experiences on Manhattan Island. From a purely military point of view, the further occupation of that island was, after the British got possession of Brooklyn Heights, not only useless, but it involved serious risk. With an enemy now in undisputed control of the surrounding waters, the place was a trap from which it was impossible to escape too soon. Greene and others advised evacuation; but Washington lingered on Manhattan Island with his now wholly demoralized army until the 15th of September, when his leisurely opponent again attacked him. Then followed the shocking affair of Kip's Bay, and the Patriots abandoned New York. Their disaster was the natural outcome of the attempt to occupy a useless position for more than two weeks after it became obviously untenable. By pure good luck, combined once more with "the dilatoriness of the enemy," Washington saved himself and the force under his command from capture.

Returning to the operations on Long Island and the errors of strategy into which both Washington and Howe there fell, it is interesting to attempt to explain the motives which actuated each. In so doing we have the benefit of that hindsight which, especially in military operations, is so vastly preferable to the foresight of even the most sagacious commanders. We have all the facts before us and see our way clearly; Washington and Howe, with only partial information, groped their way in doubt through the darkness.

In the first place what could have induced Washington, with the meagre resources both in men and material at his command, to endeavor to hold New York against such an armament as he well knew the British could then bring to bear? We now see that the attempt was not only hopeless from the start, but, in reality, there was, from a military point of view, nothing to be said in its favor. As Lee, who had in March pointed out the difficulties, subsequently wrote in September, "I would have nothing to do with the islands to which you have been clinging so pertinaciously—I would give Mr. Howe a fee-simple of them." In this conclusion,—charlatan though he was,—Lee was unquestionably right; and there can be no doubt the advice of John Jay was sound, that, without risking a battle, all the country below the Highlands should be abandoned to the British, as, under the cir-



cumstances, not capable of successful defence, and that a strictly defensive warfare should be carried on among the passes and defiles of the mountains; and he significantly and prophetically added, "I can't forbear wishing that a desire of saving a few acres may not lead us into difficulties."

The campaign of Long Island was in reality Washington's first experience of active field movement and fighting, in which he held chief command. That he profited greatly by it was subsequently apparent. He learned through his mistakes; and the mistakes of that first campaign were numerous and patent. From the 27th of August to the 15th of September the American army was almost, if not quite, at the mercy of its opponent. What then were the grounds on which Washington based his plan of operations, and what influences could have induced him to incur such extraordinary and unjustifiable risks? And, first, it is necessary to consider Washington as a military man,—to grade him, so to speak, among captains.

Although one of the most recent and popular of American historians discovers even in the New York campaign of 1776 "evidence of military genius such as has seldom been surpassed in the history of modern warfare," Washington had, in point of fact, little natural aptitude for warfare. Few even among American panegyrists will seriously claim that he was, like Hannibal, Gustavus, or Napoleon, a born general. Rather a slow man naturally, he had none of that insight which causes certain commanders in presence of an enemy—they know not why—instinctively to do the right thing at the right moment, whether in attack or defence. A man of courage and high character, compelling confidence, Washington's *forte* in military as in civil life was supreme common sense. He learned by experience; and it was in the school of experience that he made himself a safe, a competent, and a successful commander-in-chief. More he never was. Yet the curious thing about him is that his greatness, his magnanimity, and his poise always seem to assert themselves most, just when the impartial investigator is on the point of convicting him of error. The error may be there; but the man surmounts and dominates over it. That he made serious mistakes of judgment both in strategy and tactics in the New York campaign of 1776, he would later have been the last to deny. His own letters, as well as the evidence of those about him, convict him of a fatal indecision of mind in moments of crisis. And yet his sterling greatness is all the while unmistakable. He was a man, learning; and the only effect of a study of his errors, which he never sought

to deny, is to restore to him that kindly element of human nature and human weakness of which over-zealous panegyrists have done much to deprive him.

Recurring then to his attempted defence of New York, it must be remembered that in his operations about Boston only a few months before he had been most successful. Well designed and prudently conducted, they brought about full results in compelling an enemy to abandon without a battle a base of operations manifestly bad and useless for his purpose. Through these operations Washington established himself — and, as the result showed, justly established himself — in the confidence of his supporters. From Boston the theatre of operations was transferred to New York; and it is curious to observe how manifestly the Boston experiences influenced at New York the minds and actions of both Washington and Howe. The conditions were wholly different; yet both proceeded much as if they were the same.

At Boston, Washington, by securing Dorchester Heights, had made Boston Harbor untenable by the British. New York Harbor is as different from that of Boston as one harbor can well be from another; yet his whole plan of operations at New York was based on the erroneous idea that by holding Brooklyn Heights he could keep the enemy's ships out of the East River, and so defend New York; though in point of fact the place could be assailed and his flank turned on either side. Accordingly, instead of taking a large and reasonable view of the situation, and pronouncing the place indefensible, except with that command of the sea which the Americans manifestly did not have, he not only tried to defend it, but in so doing made a grave strategic mistake when he exposed himself to imminent risk of having his army cut in two by a naval operation which he had no adequate means of opposing. In doing this it cannot be claimed that he was impelled to a course his judgment did not approve by popular insistence and congressional pressure. These doubtless were great, and had their influence; but both before and after the well-nigh inevitable catastrophe, he put himself on record as believing his plan of defence reasonably practicable, and he clung to it to the last moment; while nowhere did he point out the excessive dangers it involved, enter a protest against it, or even express a preference for a radically different and safer plan. His mind was evidently influenced by his Boston experience, and by the success of Moultrie at Charleston.

Neither can it be claimed that the disaster at Flatbush was due to the illness of Greene and the incompetence of Putnam, who succeeded him in command on the eve of the engagement. Greene

relinquished the active command August 16; and it was on the 22d of August that the British landed at Gravesend. Sullivan was then acting in Greene's stead. Four days later, on the evening of the 26th, Clinton began his forward march, and on the morning of the 27th he seized the unprotected Jamaica road, and so got in the rear of Sullivan and Stirling. On the 24th Washington himself passed the day at Brooklyn, and not until his return to New York in the afternoon of that day did he appoint Putnam to take command on the Brooklyn side, at the same time giving him, as the result of his (Washington's) personal examination of the ground, specific written instructions in which he outlined the plan of operations to be pursued, especially on the point which led to disaster, — that of going out to meet the enemy with the best troops, leaving only militia in the interior works. "The militia, or the most indifferent troops," he wrote, "will do for the interior works; whilst your best men should at all hazards prevent the enemy's passing the woods and approaching your works." This, too, though Washington had himself that day observed with alarm the confusion and lack of co-operation among commands which prevailed on Long Island, and knew perfectly that there was no mounted force there to do outpost work. His idea, as that of Greene, seems to have been to inflict severe punishment on the enemy in the wooded hills between Gravesend and Brooklyn; and then to have the forces withdrawn from before the enemy, and take refuge in the Brooklyn intrenchments. But this was a hazardous game to play. To play it successfully required a skilful commander on the spot, an efficient staff, cool, well-seasoned troops, and perfect co-operation between commands; and not one of these essentials, as no one knew better than Washington, did the Americans enjoy.

Take, for instance, the matter of artillery and cavalry. To defend with effective results such an extended advance line required good outpost work, reliable courier service, and adequate, well-handled artillery. Clinton advanced with forty field-pieces: the entire American equipment consisted of six pieces, — one  $5\frac{1}{2}$ -inch howitzer, four 6-pounders, and one 3-pounder! As respects cavalry the case was still worse; the Americans had absolutely none; and, curiously enough, that they were thus fatally deficient was again due to Washington's own act. As early as the 10th of July, Governor Trumbull of Connecticut sent a detachment of light-horse, as they were called, to New York. Some three or four hundred in number, they were a body of picked men, — as Washington wrote, "most of them, if not all, men of reputation

and property." Yet, on the score of expense, he refused to allow them to keep their horses; and, when they declined to do infantry duty, he roughly dismissed them, writing to their commander, "they can no longer be of use here, where horse cannot be brought into action, and I do not care how soon they are dismissed." Yet Long Island then was full of forage, which afterwards was either destroyed or fed the horses of the British cavalry, and so shockingly deficient was the American mounted service that on the very day when Clinton turned the American flank at Bedford, Heath, the acting quartermaster-general, was writing to Mifflin from King's Bridge, "we have not a single horse here. I have written to the General for two or three." To a military critic, the attempt to hold the outer Long Island line under such circumstances seems like madness. General Sullivan afterwards declared that he had, before being superseded by Putnam, felt very uneasy about the Bedford road, and "had paid horsemen fifty dollars for patrolling [it] by night, while I had command, as I had no foot for the purpose." The inference would seem to be that the American commanders did not at this time understand the use and necessity of mounted men in field operations. A cavalry patrol of fifty men only on the flank of the American advanced line might, and probably would, have saved the commands of Sullivan and Stirling from the disaster of August 27; and yet, a few weeks before, the four hundred Connecticut mounted men had been sent home by Washington for the reason that horse could be of no service in military operations conducted necessarily on an island!

But if it is curious to observe the influence of Bunker Hill and Dorchester Heights on the mind of Washington while trying to defend New York, it is at least as curious to notice the similar influence of Concord and Fort Moultrie on the minds of the two Howes when they planned to attack New York. The extreme of rashness had given place to a caution as extreme. Yet in his operations on Long Island, Sir William Howe made the same mistake which cost him so dear at Bunker Hill. Again, instead of attacking his enemy full in front and just where he wanted to be attacked,—driving him out of the trap in which he had got himself,—Howe's effort should have been to operate on Washington's rear, seize his lines of retreat, and "bag" him and his army. No better opportunity for so doing could have been offered, as was obvious at the time and has since frequently been pointed out. It was only necessary, while demonstrating on Washington's Long Island front, to move a sufficient force—and the force at Howe's command was ample for every purpose—by way of Long Island

Sound to Flushing Bay; and thence, as he subsequently did, cross over under cover of his ships to the mainland, and strike for King's Bridge. In the meanwhile, taking advantage of the first "brisk and favorable breeze and flowing tide," Lord Howe's fleet could have moved up the East River, destroying the American transportation, and so left Washington's army hopelessly cut in two. The plan was so obvious and so wholly practicable — Washington had laid himself so open to the fatal blow — that why the thing was not done must always remain a mystery. But probably, after all, the explanation was not far to seek, — at New York, as at Bunker Hill and at Charleston, "the dilatoriness and stupidity of the enemy saved us."

So much for the land operations of the British. It was the same on the water. On the 28th of June, a little more than a year after Bunker Hill, and just two months before Flatbush, the squadron under Sir Peter Parker was severely repulsed in its attempt on Fort Moultrie. The influence of this experience was manifest in the handling of the British ships at New York in August. The squadron of Sir Peter Parker then made part of Lord Howe's fleet; and Parker was himself in command of the ships which attempted to co-operate with General Howe on the 27th of August, and failed to work into position. While the Americans seem to have felt an inordinate degree of confidence in the efficacy of their land batteries to resist attack, the inertness and even timidity of the British naval commanders throughout the operations was most noticeable and is almost inexplicable. In them there was no indication of the great traditions of the British navy. The commanders of the British fleet hardly made their presence felt.

A careful examination of the original records and a judicial weighing of the almost equally divided public feeling — Whig and Tory — of the years 1775 and 1776, cannot but give rise to grave doubts as to whether the cause of independence would then have prevailed except for that element of luck in warfare upon which Frederick the Great in his review of his own career laid such stress. In justice it must also apparently be admitted that the errors of strategy into which Washington fell at New York in the summer of 1776 were more dangerous and less excusable than that committed by Ward in June, 1776, while, on the other hand, the supreme luck which attended the Patriots at Bunker Hill by no means followed them to Long Island. An August northeasterly storm, with its accompanying rain and veil of friendly mist, did, indeed, enable them to elude the grasp of an inert and dilatory enemy, but only after the flower of the Patriot army had

been destroyed, and what remained of it so completely demoralized that for years it did not recover a proper morale. That Washington sustained himself and retained the confidence of the army and of Congress in the face of that series of disasters for which he was so largely responsible, is extraordinary, and stands as the highest tribute which could have been paid to his character and essential military qualities. Yet, in spite of what historians have since asserted, his prestige at the time was greatly diminished and his control of the situation imperilled. All eyes turned at the moment to General Charles Lee, just returning from Charleston, surrounded by the halo of the victory which Moultrie had won; and won in Lee's despite. There was for a time no inconsiderable danger that he, the most wretched charlatan of the War of Independence, might supplant Washington in the confidence of the army. He certainly did greatly embarrass his superior and thwart his combinations. But in view of what then occurred and has since taken place, it is curious to reflect how different the whole course of history would have been had the element of pure luck entered a little differently than it did into the events of June, 1775, and August, 1776. It is not easy to imagine a state of affairs during the century now closing in which the United States might have continued far into it to be what the Dominion of Canada now is, and from which the career and memory of Washington would have been obliterated.

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